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PRRC emerging trends

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RELIGION IN AMERICA

Probably no more difficult task faces the survey practitioner than that of measuring the religious mood of the nation. First of all, religious beliefs are varied and subtle and do not yield easily to categorization. Second, no consensus is found among researchers on what can be considered the key elements of a vital religious faith. The result is that we do not have, as yet, a set of leading spiritual indicators in which we can place full confidence.

At the same time, however, the steadily increasing output of survey statistics on religion is helping to fill some of the gaps in our knowledge. The following findings—from recent surveys conducted by The Gallup Organization and the Princeton Religion Research Center (PRRC)—offer important clues, I believe, to the state of religion in the United States.

A majority of Americans—8 of 10—say they are Christians, but only half that number know who delivered the Sermon on the Mount. Most Americans think the Ten Commandments are valid rules for living, but many have a tough time recalling exactly what those rules are. Among teenagers, 3 in 10 do not know the significance of Easter for Christians; among teenagers who attend church regularly, 2 in 10 do not know it. Of unchurched Americans, two-thirds believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ and that he was resurrected from the dead. The belief that Jesus will return to earth someday is held by 62 percent of all Americans. Of the total American adult population, nearly half believe in creationism—that is, that all living creatures were brought into being within the last 10,000 years—and 37 percent believe the Bible to be the actual word of God, to be taken literally, word for word. One-third of church members believe that a homosexual cannot be a good Christian or Jew. Two-thirds of all Americans think their chances of going to heaven are "good."

Americans have a variety of other beliefs in the otherworldly. A large proportion of teenagers—69 percent—believe in angels; 24 percent believe in Big Foot. Astrology has a significant following: 23 percent of adults, many of whom regularly attend religious services, and 55 percent of teenagers. Reincarnation has a smaller following: the same percentage of adults—23—but the share of teenagers drops to 27 percent.

Some of the survey results indicate religious *behavior*. For instance, nearly as high a proportion of unchurched Americans as churched say they attended Sunday school or the equivalent when they were growing up. Despite lack of affiliation with a religious institution, three-quarters of the unchurched pray and want their children to have religious training. Watching religious television shows does not drain people or money from local churches. A large majority of college students—93 percent—say there is "no chance" that they would join a cult, such as the "Moonies."

With respect to people's lives in general—that is, not restricted to the religious sphere—the strength of religion's impact varies. Half of the unchurched feel that organized religion is not effective in helping people find meaning in life; 39 percent of those who go to church agree. Despite these figures, one person in three has had a dramatic life-changing religious experience—a proportion that has changed little over the last quarter century. Religious fundamentalists, compared to others, are not so well tolerated by better-educated Americans. Greeted with more tolerance by these Americans are persons of different nationalities, races, and life-styles; the less education Americans have, the less tolerant they are of these different groups. We also find that for teenagers, of the greatest persons in history, Jesus ranks fifth.

Church attendance makes little difference in people's ethical views and behavior with respect to lying, cheating, pilferage, and not reporting theft. For example, equal proportions of churched and unchurched admit to overstating deductions or understating income on their tax forms.

Despite the considerable attention given the issue of religion and politics, relatively few Americans—4 percent—report that the clergy of the church or synagogue they attend urged them to vote for a particular presidential candidate or join a particular political party during the 1984 presidential campaign. Still, 51 percent of Americans would not vote for an atheist for president. Concerning the place of religion in society, nearly half of all Americans think this statement—"This state shall be separate from the church and the church from the school"—is found in the U.S. Constitution. In fact, these

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Americans are mistaken; the statement is from the constitution of the Soviet Union.

Now, these disparate survey items are not only interesting in themselves – and perhaps, in some cases, shocking – but they also shed light, I believe, on the complex picture of religion in America today:

- the widespread appeal or popularity of religion;
- the glaring lack of knowledge;
- the inconsistencies in belief;
- the superficiality of faith; and
- the failure of organized religion in some respects to make a difference in our society.

THE REASON FOR RESEARCH

These survey findings may be intriguing and help shed light on the spiritual condition of Americans, but we should ask the question, Is research on religion really necessary, or is this pursuit of academic interest only?

I believe there are three important reasons for probing the religious and spiritual lives of people in the United States and around the world.

First of all, there are sociological reasons. Our survey evidence suggests that the spiritual dynamic in American life often has more to do with how we think and behave in society than do the more traditional background characteristics such as age, education, and political affiliation.

Let's examine this assertion. Those in our surveys who fit our definition of the "highly spiritually committed" appear to be a breed apart from the rest of the populace in at least four key respects. For one thing, they are more satisfied with their lot in life than are those who are less spirtually committed – and far happier. A total of 68 percent of the highly spiritually committed say they are "very happy," compared to 46 percent of the moderately spiritually committed, 39 percent of the moderately uncommitted, and 30 percent of the highly uncommitted. Second, they tend to place greater importance on family life than do less spiritually committed persons. Third, they tend to be more tolerant of persons of different races and religions. Finally, they do not turn inward; rather, they are vitally concerned about the betterment of society. They are, for example, far more involved in charitable activities than are their counterparts. A total of 46 percent of the highly spiritually committed say they are presently working among the poor, the infirm, and the elderly, compared to 36 percent of the moderately committed, 28 percent of the moderately uncommitted, and 22 percent of the highly uncommitted.

What makes these findings even more remarkable is the fact that these persons tend to belong to lower socioeconomic groups than the population as a whole, and surveys have shown that these groups tend to be less happy and less satisfied with their lot in life than are higher socioeconomic groups, less tolerant of persons of different races and religions, and, finally, less involved in charitable activities. So despite enormous pressures, economic and otherwise, these people appear to be living their faith to a remarkable extent.

This set of findings, and others, suggests that any exploration of the nature and direction of U.S. society would be woefully incomplete without a knowledge of the role that religious convictions play in shaping our opinions and behavior.

In addition to the sociological, there are practical reasons for undertaking religious research. Bluntly stated, churches in the United States have a marketing problem. Good communication involves listening as well as talking. Before a church can plan for its future and operate on the basis of facts – not assumptions – it should seek answers to certain basic questions:

1. What are the current levels of religious belief, practice, knowledge, spiritual commitment, and stewardship among the people of the church?

2. To what extent do people of the church put their faith into practice?

3. What are the spiritual and physical needs of the people that the church is intended to serve?

4. What brings people to a given church – and what keeps them away?

It is my belief that every church in America ought to conduct a survey. Too many churches – even strong ones – are drifting without an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, without clear goals, and without a plan to achieve them. Incidentally, the PRRC, in conjunction with Continental Research Associates, will soon publish a survey manual kit to enable churches to systematically answer these four basic questions. The manual will provide step-by-step guidance on how volunteers can conduct a survey of church members – and even of the broader community where their church is located.

Finally, there are compelling religious reasons for conducting survey research into people's spiritual lives. If, as the vast majority of people of the Free World believe, there is a God who is interested in humanity, then it is our urgent duty to examine the relationship of human beings to God with all the skill we can muster.

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In this respect, we are fortunate to have at our disposal an efficient and accurate way to explore people's religious beliefs – the scientific sample survey, which along with the printing press and television must be regarded as one of those scientific discoveries of modern history that has had, and will continue to have, the greatest impact on the religious lives of mankind.

SOME OF THE SURVEYS CONDUCTED

Survey research in the area of religion has lagged far behind survey research in virtually every other field – politics, consumer behavior, and many other fields. There are a variety of reasons for this lag, including the belief that it was inappropriate or impossible to probe spiritual feeling. Church leaders, furthermore, were unsophisticated about polling, thinking it would be enormously expensive and difficult.

At any rate, it was not until fairly recently that survey research in the field of religion began in earnest. A growing number of denominations, for example, are now involved in the study of religious phenomena, particularly those relating to institutional religion.

Furthermore, we have seen the emergence of independent research organizations concerned with religion, including the PRRC, which was founded in 1977 to gain a better understanding, through scientifically conducted surveys, of the nature and depth of religious commitment in the United States and abroad.

Since 1977 the Gallup Organization, often in conjunction with the PRRC, has conducted a number of national surveys on religion for a wide variety of clients. The following are just a few of them:

- the first global survey – covering 70 nations – dealing with religious beliefs and practices;[1]
- the most comprehensive attempt to explore the lifestyle, attitude, and belief differences between churched and unchurched Americans;[2]
- the first major survey of the religious beliefs and practices of Hispanic Catholics in the United States;[3]
- the first major survey of the religious beliefs and practices of the Greek Orthodox population in the United States;[4]
- the most comprehensive survey of evangelical Christian laity and clergy in the United States;[5]
- a comprehensive national survey designed to explore the core of the faith of Christians and the role of Jesus Christ in the lives of Americans;[6]
- a survey, believed to be the first of its kind, to determine the impact of the electronic church on the beliefs, attitudes, and life-styles of the American people;[7] and
- an exploration of the factors that separate the Left from the Right, in terms of religious beliefs, and the steps that can be taken to bring them together.[8]

In 1982, The Gallup Organization conducted an intensive survey for the Robert H. Schuller Ministries, designed to measure the relationships between self-esteem, life-style factors, and religious beliefs. It examined various components of what may be described as one's self-concept or image. Three key measures were employed. First, a standardized measure of self-esteem developed by Dr. Morris Rosenberg. The Rosenberg self-esteem scale may be described as a measure of one's attitude toward self, or one's self-worth. Second, a scale developed especially for this survey that measures one's self-concept with respect to personal qualities such as leadership ability and perseverance. Finally, a scale developed for the study to measure one's self-concept with respect to personal qualities such as dependability, generosity and friendliness.

Recently the Gallup Organization has been exploring the development of faith in the adult age cycle.[9] Preliminary findings from this survey indicate that, despite the common belief that faith is something given, constant and unchanging, people go through the same kind of passages in their religious lives as they do in other forms of personal development.

INCREASED INTEREST IN SURVEYS

Why has interest in survey research in religion grown so markedly in recent years? A number of key reasons, some noted earlier, can be offered.

One is a growing awareness of the need to probe beneath the level of religious involvement to the bedrock

1. Conducted by the Princeton Religion Research Center, and The Gallup Organization, for the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, 1977.
2. Conducted for a coalition of 31 faiths and denominations, 1978.
3. Conducted for *Our Sunday Visitor*, 1978.
4. Conducted for the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, 1980.
5. Conducted for *Christianity Today*, 1978.
6. Conducted for the Robert H. Schuller Ministries, 1983.
7. Undertaken by the University of Pennsylvania Annenberg School of Communications, Philadelphia, PA, and the Gallup Organization, and initiated by the National Council of Churches, the United States Catholic Conference, and National Religious Broadcasters, 1983.
8. Completed in 1984, this survey was undertaken for the Robert H. Schuller Ministries.
9. Part of a larger study undertaken for Faith Development in the Adult Life Cycle, a research project of the Religious Education Association of the United States and Canada in cooperation with the Center for Religious Education, College of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN, 1982–85.

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of spiritual commitment. The most important statistic for churches is, in the last analysis, not the proportion of people who are members or who attend regularly – although these are vital survival statistics – but the proportion who could be classified as "highly spiritually committed" – truly devout, if you will. In addition, surveys are attracting more and more attention as practical, efficient, and relatively inexpensive ways to find out key information about a local church – for example, levels of religious belief, practice, and knowledge, as well as stewardship potential. Surveys can also help address a widespread problem of a very practical nature: that a decline in church membership reduces church revenues.

Among religious bodies, there is a growing interest in evangelization – reaching out to the nominally religious or the nonreligious. Churches are becoming more willing to listen to the laity. And there is an increased willingness among various churches to tackle mutual problems together, in the spirit of ecumenism. Surveys can assist in these efforts.

From a sociological perspective, the importance of examining religious beliefs and practices is receiving increased recognition. Recent surveys give still further evidence of the importance of the religious dynamic in determining the overall attitudes and behavior of a populace.

And then, of course, there are strictly religious reasons for a growing interest in survey research in the effort to shed light on vital questions: What do people believe about God? How strongly do they hold these beliefs? What differences do strongly held beliefs make in terms of the life of the individual and in terms of society as a whole? How is a strong faith developed?

WHAT SURVEYS REVEAL

What are our surveys telling us about the contemporary religious scene?

There would appear to be, in America today, a rising tide of interest in religion. A majority of Americans, for example, say they are more interested in religious and spiritual matters than they were five years ago. New religious conviction is noted on the college campuses of the nation, with a marked increase in the last five years in the number of students who say religion is important in their lives and who attend church regularly.

It seems that the people of this nation are coming increasingly to believe that the problems of the world will not be solved through people's efforts alone but through a change of heart and a turning to God – not simply through social engineering but through social engineering energized and uplifted by spiritual renewal.

Americans today appear to be searching with a new intensity for spiritual moorings. What is prompting this search? One of the key factors is a need for hope in these troubled times of nuclear threat. Accompanying this need, a note of desperation is sometimes found in the comments of survey respondents: "Where else but to God does one turn in times like these?" Another factor is a gnawing loneliness among Americans – greater loneliness, we find in surveys, than is found in many other nations – which is causing Americans urgently to seek supportive and dependable fellowship. One of the greatest problems of our times is that of strained relationships. Third, we find a disenchantment with modern life-styles and with what is perceived to be a lack of rules and an anything-goes philosophy in society.

Americans express a high level of confidence in our local and national religious leaders. This is coupled with a high level of religiousness among the American people: 9 in 10 Americans state a religious preference; 8 in 10 say religion is important in their lives. Even a high proportion of the unchurched can be classified as believers. Most of us pray and believe in the power of prayer. We want our faith to grow and we want religion to play a greater role in society.

Given the high level of public confidence in our churches and clergy, and the fact that Americans are essentially a religious people who want to deepen their faith, organized religion would seem to have enormous opportunities in the immediate years ahead.

But if the opportunities are great, so are the challenges. Among these are the following three, which will set much of the agenda for the churches in the 1980s and 1990s.

The first challenge is to raise the level of ethics and morality in the United States. A large majority of Americans, we discovered in a recent *Wall Street Journal*/Gallup survey, believe that the level of ethics among the public has declined over the last decade, and additional findings on behavior from the same survey show that this belief is well founded. Columnist Michael McManus questions the impact of religion in our society and makes this observation: "If religion does not produce a more ethical, loving society, something is fundamentally wrong with the way that religion is being practiced."[10]

The second challenge is dealing with hunger and deprivation in the United States. In a recent Gallup poll,

10. Michael McManus's nationally syndicated column, "Ethics & Religion."

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one-fifth of the population claimed there were times during the preceding 12 months when they did not have enough money to buy the food, clothing, or medical supplies their families needed. Among blacks, close to half reported these conditions.

The last challenge is to raise the level of self-esteem or self-worth among the American people. In a survey for the Robert H. Schuller Ministries, we discovered that 3 in 10 Americans have a low sense of self-worth. Low self-esteem is considered by many experts to be the number one psychological problem in America today.

It will be the ongoing task of survey researchers in the field of religion in the years ahead to measure the success of churches in meeting challenges such as these, as well as exploring the quality of people's religious lives. And, in view of the fact that we live in a world that has become increasingly violent – at the beginning of 1985 there were 40 major or minor wars in the world, with religious factors sometimes exacerbating the situation – perhaps the most important role of religious research in the decades ahead will be to shed light on ways that will help people and nations see more clearly not that which divides them but that which unites them.

Yet there would seem to be ample survey evidence to support the views of Colton, who wrote: "Men will wrangle for religion; write for it; fight for it; die for it; anything but *live* for it."

And quoting Jonathan Swift: "We have just enough religion to make us hate. But not enough to make us love one another."

Adapted from an article appearing in *The Annals of The American Academy*, by George Gallup, Jr., 1985.

TEEN SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL PRAYERS GROWS SHARPLY

Evidence that efforts on the part of some groups to encourage prayer in the schools are yielding results is seen from the Gallup Youth Survey, which shows teen support to have grown sharply since 1981.

In the earlier survey, teens were evenly divided, with 45% saying they favored school prayers and 43% opposed. In the latest survey, the vote is 2-to-1 in favor, 60% to 31%, bringing the views of teenagers more in line with those of the nation's adults. A 1984 Gallup Poll showed 69% of adults, 18 and older, favoring school prayers.

Another factor contributing to the upturn in teen support for school prayer may be what has been identified as a renewed search for spiritual values – many, for example, would like to talk more about religion with their parents – coupled with concern that religion's influence on American life is decreasing. (A 55% majority of teenagers believes religion is losing its impact.)

Following is the question, and trend:

"Do you favor or oppose prayer in the schools?"

PRAYER IN SCHOOLS

	1985 %	1981 %
Favor	60	45
Oppose	31	43
No opinion	9	12

An upturn in teen support for school prayers is found among all groups and in all regions, but is most pronounced among Protestants and non-Southerners.

One teenager in five (19%) reports that a regular time is set aside for prayers in the school he or she attends. This is slightly higher than the 13% reported in 1981.

Three in 10 Catholic teenagers (28%) say prayers are said, while 17% of Protestants say this is the case. The highest percentage (26%) is in the South; the lowest (11%) in the West.

FIGURES FOR ADULTS

Gallup Polls conducted since the 1962 Supreme Court ruled that organized prayer in public schools is not permissable under the First Amendment have consistently shown heavy majorities of adults in favor of prayer in schools.

Yet, while the public overwhelmingly favors permitting prayer in schools, the prevailing opinion among all groups and faiths is that the home is more important than either the church or schools in the religious upbringing of children.

The findings for teenagers are based on telephone interviews with a representative national cross section of 502 teenagers 13 through 18, conducted in May and June, 1985.

FAITH DEVELOPMENT AND YOUR MINISTRY

Building a truly effective ministry requires an awareness of the stages of growth in a person's spiritual life, from childhood to old age, as well as an awareness of the impact of "life crises" on faith development.

Not only an awareness but a *response*, because failure to minister to people at their current stage of faith development – and to respond appropriately to their spiritual "highs" and "lows" – could result in a serious dropout rate in your church or synagogue.

For centuries it has been assumed that faith is something given, constant, unchanging. Now, however, it is clear that people go through "passages" in their spiritual lives, just as they do in other dimensions of their existence. Yet many religious professionals – clergy, counselors, youth leaders, and educators – sometimes appear to be insensitive, in their teaching and program planning, to people's spiritual journeys.

This new publication, FAITH DEVELOPMENT AND YOUR MINISTRY, based on a landmark study four years in the making, will guide you in your efforts to respond to the spiritual changes people experience as they move through life. The study was conducted by The Gallup Organization, Inc. for Faith Development in the Adult Age Cycle, a research project of the Religious Education Association of the United States and Canada in cooperation with the Center for Religious Education, College of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minn.

FAITH DEVELOPMENT AND YOUR MINISTRY not only sheds light on these and other vital questions, but also explores the practical implications of the survey findings for your ministry.

If you preach, write, or teach, we sincerely believe you will find FAITH DEVELOPMENT AND YOUR MINISTRY to be of great help in your work.

HOW TO ORDER

This new publication may be ordered from The Princeton Religion Research Center, Inc. (P.O. Box 310, Princeton, N.J. 08542). The cost is $25 postpaid.

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